DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 075 488 TM 002 567

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TITLE School Accountability Laws.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 4p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Accountability; *Educational Legislation; Guides; *School Responsibility; *State Legislation

ABSTRACT

An accountable school is seen as being one that (1) discloses its activities, (2) makes good on staff promises, (3) assigns staff responsibility for each area of public concern, and (4) monitors its teaching and learning. School accountability laws are seen as a national demand that must be satisfied. To satisfy the present demands for legislation, to help the schools change, and to be least damaging to what the schools are doing well, a school accountability law should call for the following characteristics: (1) commitments from schools to provide high-quality teaching, opportunities for enriching experiences, and accommodation to the individual needs and aspirations of students and teachers; (2) an annual visit to each school by at least one committee of citizens; (3) judgment as to quality of instruction made by professional educators both inside and outside the school; (4) standardized measures of student basic skills by testing and by professional observation; (5) updated specifications of the errors of measurement for individual student scores, group means, and differences of both, as well as errors of measurement in nonstandardized observations and professional judgment; (6) each school should have a confidentiality policy; (7) each school should have a grievance procedure; (8) one or more centers should be established for the evaluation of individual teacher competence; and (9) schools should be supported in efforts to keep bureaucracy to a minimum. To be in the best interests of the people, state accountability laws should protect local control of the school, individuality of teachers, and diversity of learning opportunities. (DB)

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10/2/72
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SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY LAWS

Robert E. Stake

The schools are consuming an enormous share of the tax funds that a local community spends on itself.

Schools are large and bureaucratic. In the eyes of many citizens, teachers are remote, protectionist, increasingly militant, no longer given to social-service motives. Annual negotiations between teacher organizations and boards of education are seen as contrary to the public interest.

Schools do not provide equal educational opportunity for individual learners. Those who have had greater preschool opportunities recieve greater in-school opportunities. Efforts to close the gap, especially through national programs, have not succeeded in doing so. Using the local schools (or anything else perhaps) to equalize social and educational privileges is vigorously opposed by most people.

Disappointed, and even angry, the people agree with demands that the schools be more accountable. The demands are fostered by educational spokesmen who erroneously imply that the majority of educational goals are shared by all persons. The demands are fanned by educational technologists who make extravagant claims about specific differences the schools make in children's lives and who imply that accountability is something they can objectively measure.

Legislative bodies, at all levels of government, have a responsibility for relieving troubled constituents. State legislatures in particular have an increasingly apparent responsibility for improving the quality of education in the state. Legislatures are rejecting the idea that schools will improve if better funded. Funds are not available anyway. And on those occasions when new funds are found and used to hire better personnel, purchase better instructional materials, or reorganize the school, it does not seem to relieve the troubles. So the legislatures turn now to the control of schools, toward making the schools "accountable."

Accountability, in a strict sense, means to have good records and to make actions open-to-view. Strictly speaking, an accountable school is one that (1) discloses its activities, (2) makes good on staff promises, (3) assigns staff responsibility for each area of public concern, and (4) monitors its teaching and learning. Some spokesmen extend the definition of the accountable school to (5) one that gathers evidence of making good on public expectations, (6) one that through research discovers the causes of strength and weakness, and (7) one that provides cost-effectiveness information on alternative programs. The extended definition is one that a school can strive to live by but one that--because of our inability to measure these things--no school can presently fulfill. The lesser definition is a realistic obligation.

Control of the schools by local communities is a tradition in this country. It has worked well: the schools have been in harmony with the needs and preferences of the majority groups in the communities. But minorities have not been well served by the public schools. And state "accountability" laws, as presently conceived, are more likely to aggravate than relieve this problem.

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Most state accountability proposals call for more uniform standards across the state, greater prespecification of objectives, more careful analysis of learning sequences, and better testing of student performance. These plans are doomed. What they bring is more bureaucracy, more subterfuge, and more constraints on student opportunities to learn. The newly enacted school accountability laws will not succeed in improving the quality of education for any group of learners.

There are ways for schools to be more accountable in the strict sense. There are obvious ways for schools to be more open to the public and deliberate. The state can contribute to this accountability by being intolerant of specific things that cause public outcry but by generally supporting the schools, particularly in their efforts to make major changes in policy or personnel. Greater support is extremely difficult to provide, partly because it is useful to many critics to continue to belabor the schools.

School accountability laws are a national demand that must be satisfied. It is possible for them to be written so as to alleviate rather than aggravate the situation. If these laws draw attention to the quality of teaching and to the extension of learning opportunities, rather than to the quality of student performance, the response from the school may be wholesome. School personnel do not--nor does anyone else--know how to make specific massive improvement in student performance. It will not help to specify what all students should know, or feel, or be able to do. In fact, it will hurt. The improvement most people yearn for will only come when opportunities come, in school and out. The schools need to be encouraged to examine the quality of learning opportunities they provide.

To satisfy the present demands for legislation, to help the schools change, and to be of least damage to what the schools are doing well, a school accountability law should call for the following characteristics:

1. Each school should confirm, and periodically reconfirm, its commitment to provide (a) high-quality teaching in the academic areas; (b) opportunities for experience that leads to social and intellectual maturity, personal responsibility, and humane sensitivity; and (c) accommodation to the individual needs and aspirations of students and their parents. (There is no one-and-only way that this statement must be made nor no obligatory level of detail as to its manifestation.)

2. In addition to continuing observation by the local board of education, each school should be visited annually by at least one committee of citizens. They would make a public report. Additional committees could be established by citizen initiative (even by a small minority). Guides for visitation should be made available.

3. Judgment of the quality of instruction should be provided by professional educators from within and outside the school. (Accreditation self-study procedures sometimes work well for this purpose.) Noncognitive aims and accomplishments, as well as basic skills and academics, should be included.

4. Each school should obtain standardized measures of student basic skill by testing and by professional observation.

Testing programs should be available from various commercial and noncommercial sources (but not from the state office of public instruction; only the list of sources from there) with the choice left to the local school. The obligatory report to the state would indicate the school's testing activities, not the results of testing.

5. Each school should provide updated specifications of the errors of measurement for individual student scores, for group means, and for differences of both. These should be summarized in language lay people use. Errors of measurement in nonstandardized observations and professional judgment should be discussed as well.

6. Each school should have a confidentiality policy. Scores and observations of individual students should be considered the property of the child's parents and not transmitted through usual channels without blanket permission and not transmitted to an unusual party without explicit permission. Scores of all-school performance should be released according to board policy. No results of testing should be required by the state.

7. Each school should have a grievance procedure whereby students and citizens could present claims against school policy or practice. These claims should be heard at the local level by at least two persons, one a member of the community and one a member of the school staff. Recommendations should be made to the principal, superintendent, or board, as appropriate. Opportunity for appeal to a court or the state superintendent would be made clear to the claimant.

8. One or more centers should be established for the evaluation of individual teacher competence. Areas for attention would be such as ability to get behavior change, subject-matter knowledge, communication effectiveness, recognition of unequal learning opportunities, recognition of importance of aesthetic experience in school, recognition of learning problems. These centers would be available to teachers who would present themselves (under orders or voluntarily) for interview, micro-teaching, observation, and testing. The center might solicit additional evidence of competence from the home school or community. Only those teachers being recognized as highly competent would be given citations from the center.

9. The schools would be supported in their efforts to keep bureaucracy at a minimum. One or more procedures would be established to give outside review to the school and district as to the danger of administrative overload. Too great a proportion of funds and effort should not be spent in any school on general administration, supervision, and special services.

If state accountability laws are to be in the best interests of the people, they should protect local control of the schools, individuality of teachers, and diversity of learning opportunities. They should not escalate the bureaucracy at the state or

local level. They should not allow school ineffectiveness to be more easily ignored by drawing attention to student performance. They should not permit test scores to be overly influencial in schoolwide or personal decisions--the irreducible errors of test scores should be recognized. The laws should make it easier for a school to be accountable to the community in providing a variety of high quality learning opportunities for every learner.